

Discussion Questions: *Educated* by Tara Westover

1. *Educated* starts with an epigraph from Virginia Woolf: “The past is beautiful because one never realizes an emotion at the time. It expands later, and thus we don’t have complete emotions about the present, only the past. What do you think Woolf meant by this? Why do you think Tara Westover chose to begin her memoir this way?”
2. In the first pages, we are introduced to the mountain in rural Idaho where the Westover family lives, described as a dark, beautiful and commanding form in a “jagged little patch of Idaho.” How does this setting inform their experience? We are also introduced to the standoff at Ruby Ridge. How does this incident cast a shadow over the Westover parents and their children, and the survivalism that characterizes their upbringing?
3. Westover’s father Gene’s faith is a sort of character in this book, informing how he sees the world. What did you make of Chapter 8, “Tiny Harlots”, which moves from Gene’s distrust of Westover’s dance recital uniform to his pride over her singing in church?
4. Westover’s mother is a midwife and herbalist. How does her perception of these kinds of healing change over the course of her life? How does working change her?
5. In the chapter entitled “Fish Eyes”, we are introduced to Shawn’s abuse of Westover and the other women in his life, which recurs throughout the book. When Westover starts crying over one of these early incidents, she writes that she is crying from the pain, not from Shawn hurting her, and that she sees herself as “unbreakable.” She also writes that this abuse not affecting her ‘was the effect’. Why is this insight important?
6. In the 2nd part of the book, Westover has decided that she wants to get an education, has found a way to take the ACT, and has left the mountain to go to college at BYU, despite her father’s objections. In her first class at BYU, Westover recounts not knowing what the word “Holocaust” means. Why is this moment significant?
7. By Chapter 22, Westover writes that her life was often “narrated for me by others. Their voices were forceful, emphatic, and absolute. It had never occurred to me that *my* voice might be as strong as theirs.” What is the significance of this realization? Do you identify at all with this?
8. Westover writes that her father looked slumped when she left for Cambridge, an expression of “love and fear and loss” because when she’s across the ocean he can’t keep her safe. How did you view her relationship with her father, and did your perception of the relationship change throughout the book?
9. After Westover decides to continue her education, she finds it increasingly difficult to reconcile her life on the mountain with her new life as a student of history. She writes that she had a “fractured mind.” Does it seem to you that she must lose one life to gain another?
10. One of the most difficult scenes in the book comes near the end, when Westover realizes that Shawn has killed his dog Diego after coming to her parents’ house with a knife in hand. How does this moment change things for Westover?
11. One professor describes Westover as “Pygmalion,” while Westover herself at one point says she believed she could “be remade, my mind recast” at her university. And in the end, she writes that she is a “changed person” from the person she was as her father’s daughter, and from her 16-year-old self. “You could call this selfhood many things,” she writes. “Transformation, Falsity. Betrayal. I call it an education.” What do you make of these final words?